All Bound for Mu Mu Land

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

Boo! was a curious deviation for MicroProse, an outfit inextricably linked in gamer's consciousness with complex vehicle and strategy simulation games such as Civilization, F-15 Strike Eagle, Formula One Grand Prix, M1 Tank Platoon, Midwinter, Pirates!, Railroad Tycoon and UFO: Enemy Unknown to name-drop a small slice of their monumental back catalogue.

The brief revolved around the creation of a hedonistic, modern platformer with RPG elements to set it apart from an already crowded 'me-too' marketplace. It was to be an ambitious, cutesy blend of console favourites such as Mario and Sonic with the adventure-centric mechanics of Zelda, and aimed at a universal audience to maximise its appeal.

Development began in June 1994 with a view to a simultaneous release on the Amiga (all of them), Mega Drive and SNES, initially in time for the Christmas cash-splurge season. The MicroProse management team clearly weren't opposed to tight 'windows of opportunity', and a psychiatrist's waiting room full of stress!

The crux of the gameplay entails solving obstacle-based puzzles through collecting objects and body-swapping with a menagerie of kooky characters, the inspiration for which being drawn from horror-themed novels, movies and TV shows. In a generous frame of mind, Boo! can be considered a doting pastiche. Nonetheless, MicroProse walk a fine line between the tongue-in-cheek parody of classic movie monsters with novelty name-tweaks, and outright IP larceny. Perhaps it's a moot point as many of the works alluded to are

so old they no longer fall within the remit of copyright protection, and the more contemporary, *debatable* sources such as The Addams Family and The Munsters are themselves homages to older franchises.

Until activated, these vessels remain inanimate statues. Ghost-driven under your control, however, their unique abilities can be engaged at will to advance your progress. To put it in a 'late to the party' Amiga context, think Fury of the Furries at a last supper soiree with Casper the Friendly Ghost, silver service courtesy of The Lost Vikings. If any of the caricatures give you the impression you're climbing the walls, you can put that down to Zool's influence. Not that there's anything wrong with cherry-picking and adapting tried and tested, winning tropes. Platforming heroes have been doing that since the dawn of Mario, and there are only so many ways you can reconstitute running, jumping and head-bouncing in a two-dimensional plane before gamer's appetite for the genre turns stale.

Fresh from lending his game design and mapping acumen to MicroProse's inaugural platformer, the charmingly eccentric Tinhead for the Mega Drive, Richard Lemarchand joined the team to work his endearing madness - I mean *magic* - on Boo! We have him to thank for the game's refreshingly offbeat mechanics and bizarre plot, which we'll get to all in good time.
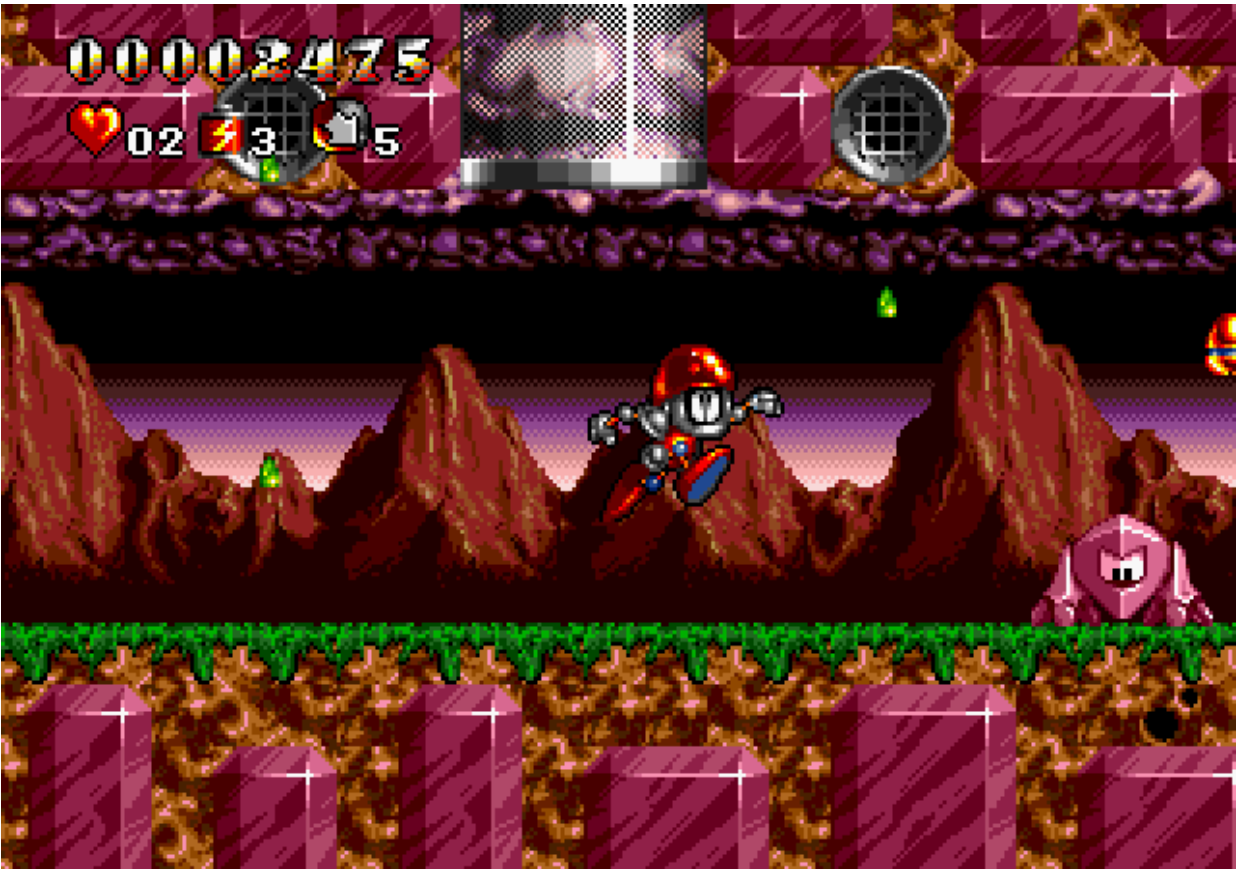
Incidentally, during its inception, Tinhead was also destined for a SNES and Amiga outing, though regrettably was cancelled prior to the project reaching fruition. Our loss was the Mega Drive's gain.

Richard is one of those exceedingly lucky people who have managed to combine their passions with an enduring and successful career path. When I approached him to pick his brains for this article, full of enthusiasm he told me, "I'm honored that you're interested in Boo! - it was a real labour of love!" That much posolutely shines through in his work - this was never to be anything resembling a slapdash, E.T. licensed game!

Consummate animator, artist, storyboarder and director, Keith Scoble - whose name you may have seen affiliated with his work on Danger Mouse and Count Duckula - was tasked

with devising the luscious backdrops, convivially hare-brained sprite designs and animation, all in his own inimitable style.

These were scanned into Deluxe Paint, and along with sound effects provided by legendary composer, Allister Brimble, and John Broomhall's sublime, distinctively befitting, 'altogether ooky' music, were dropped at the doorstep of Whitby-based developers, The Conversion Company, to be sculpted into a playable game. *Literally* that is - the external party's contributions were *posted* to the studio where graphicians, Paul and Andy McCarthy and Mike Smilie, adapted Keith's designs for use in the game, whilst the audio/animation was synchronised by coder, Nick Vincent. I'm reliably informed that the development team never actually met Keith or either of the musicians at any point; an early example of teleworking I suppose.

Curious to find out if that was also the case for the musicians, I took the opportunity to ask Allister how the collaboration between himself and John worked in practice. He elaborated,

"Basically John Broomhall wrote the music in MIDI and I converted everything to work on the SNES including making lots of tiny instrument samples on a Kurzweil K2000 synth".

The project was in safe hands given that its director, the computer design polymath, Mike Hutchinson, already had a solid track record working with the likes of SEGA and Nintendo. Among their roster of notable credits operating under the Conversion Company label are ports of Defender of the Crown for the ZX Spectrum, Count Duckula 2 on the Commodore 64, and the Game Boy Colour version of SWIV.

Peculiarly it was as though landing the contract had been written in the stars. Dracula's comic strip doppelganger has a starring role in Boo! as 'Bratula'. Whitby is designated as the birthplace of the genuine article, the author, Bram Stoker, having drawn inspiration from the seaside town and set the novel there, and The Conversion Company previously worked on the second Count Duckula game, which is based on the animated dark comedy-drama of the same name, itself a send-up of Dracula! As if that wasn't enough to seal the deal, Mike Hutchinson's name also appears in the credits for Probe's 'Bram Stoker's Dracula' for the NES, Game Boy, Game Gear, and Master System. Whilst it's not clear what was contributed, he received 'special thanks'.

Kieth, If you do the colour scheme for the hypno attack we'll use that in the game.

Boo!   URP!   ARF!

It's my pleasure to report that Mike's company (APC 4 Me) has survived two UK economic recessions since its inception in 1986, and is still going strong today, albeit operating in a different capacity as an IT support and training provider, and custom web design purveyor. The number of old-school Amiga development ensembles who can match that claim can likely be counted on a single hand!

If you visit in November you can take part in the annual Whitby Goth Weekend, tour the historic abbey *and* drop in on Mike for a chat (tell him I sent you and he might sign some ectoplasm for you). Sadly you've missed the boat if you wanted to pop into the first dog fashion, bling and accessories boutique I ever stumbled across. That's long gone - I think it's a chippy or hair salon now?

In addition, Mike runs two retail outlets including a kind of independent Forbidden Planet style emporium, also based in Whitby, and is "planning to come back into the games

market, having been part of the Apple app development program for several years."

He informs me, "the main appeal of producing apps is that there's no publisher to do battle with and I would be able to fund the development myself from my other interests". The tide is certainly turning in favour of the bedroom coder once again - in truth, there's never been a more favourable time to exorcise your coding demons if you have a penchant for software design.

For anyone hoping to follow in his footsteps, Mike may be able to offer a clue as to one route to success and longevity.

> "I attribute my approach to business, which has stood me in good stead, to my experiences in the video game industry."

Meanwhile, back on planet Boo!, the plot - courtesy of prolific game designer, Richard Lemarchand - is a zany, dairy-inflected revitalisation of the 'repel the alien invaders' family favourite. To be more precise, King Bully and his horde of Moo-tant cows from the planet Pasturyzd are hell-bent on plundering the earth's grass supplies, presumably because they've been listening to too much Bob Marley music and have acquired a proclivity for the wacky-backy (what's that, the manual is referring to the *other* type of grass, as in chewing the cud?). Sorry, my mistake.

Unfortunately for Bully, he's chosen the stomping ground of Stupendo the Fabtastic Wizard from which to stage his attack. What he hadn't factored in was that you and he are bosom buddies, and you aren't prepared to stand for any of his cheesy shenanigans. Once this dawned on him, he must have looked like the cat that got the (sour) cream, and been left with egg on his face!

Complicating matters further, Stupendo's trusty wand, Wazzo, has been pilfered so your only weapon is the not-so-almighty "boo", exclamatory yawp. While pretty feeble in itself, this drawback forces you to play the game tactically, engaging your wits over your trigger finger. You have to be smarter than the average Boo-Boo.

Despite showing great promise, and the largely complete game having been enthusiastically previewed in the February 1995 issues of Amiga Action, CD32 Gamer and The One, it was consigned to the 'Games that Weren't' wasteland owing to financial difficulties - and I imagine - the shifting predilections of the gaming public. During that era they seemingly only had eyes for Doom and its ilk.

The game cost £65,000 to produce, and to break even it was estimated that it would need to sell 16,500 copies, and a further 94,500 to be profitable, yet during a time when interest in the platform genre was waning, perhaps this was deemed infeasible. This coupled with MicroProse's uncertain future and the dismantling of its long-standing independent status culminated in Boo!'s coffin being eternally nailed shut.

To get the low-down I stalked Boo!'s producer, Stuart Whyte, and pestered him into conducting an interview concerning the misfired spectre. Luckily for us he's a top bloke, agreed to the proposal immediately and even shared some work in progress artwork, animation, the design document and converted VHS footage of the game in action.

The latter is a compelling coup, not least because it includes a sample of John Broomhall's previously unheard, gleefully eerie, caper backing track. In fact, the video in its entirety is an exclusive so it's an honour to be able to preamble its inaugural unveiling here.

Stuart uploaded the remainder of the game's WIP artefacts to his own web site in 2007, though they have long since been inaccessible due to the host - Angelfire - shifting to a subscription-only business model and culling his account.

The Deluxe Paint-borne goodies reveal how the SNES graphics would have looked and animated, which in turn allows you to visualise the Amiga incarnation, seeing as they were to share the same base assets.

In the video you can see how it all neatly ties together along with the finished intro sequence, which explains the Caerphilly woven plot. Even the parallax scrolling that was to be a premium feature of the SNES and AGA Amiga versions is firmly in place. Is it a crying shame Boo! never saw the twilight of the crypt? You cheddar believe it!

"Mr Ranger isn't going to like this", but *you* might. Enjoy!

Q. Would you mind telling our readers a bit about your history with MicroProse and how the idea for Boo! emerged, please?

A. Oh my goodness. Do you know? I can't remember! We need to get Richard Lemarchand in this interview as well to give his input!

Q. Do weirdos often contact you asking about 22-year-old 'Games That Weren't'?

A. You're the first!

Q. Previously MicroProse had focused almost exclusively on simulation games. Were these very time consuming and expensive to produce, and was that the impetus for dabbling with the platform genre via titles such as Tinhead and Boo!?

A. Microprose focused very much on PC in the early years and latterly attempted to move (not very successfully unfortunately) into the arcade market. At one point EA and Microprose were similar sizes but EA saw the market opportunity of console way ahead of Microprose. I think by the time Microprose decided to get involved they were behind the curve compared to some of their competitors. Games such as Tinhead, Boo, Pirates! Gold, F-15 II etc. were all an attempt to gain console market share.

Q. MicroProse were struggling financially at the time of Boo!'s development in 1994. Was the title seen as a last-ditch saviour to keep you afloat?

A. I doubt it! Microprose was still a large company back in this time and was still making successful games such as X-Com/UFO.

Q. How did the collaboration with Keith Scoble come about?
Was he to be promoted as the game's USP?

A. Again I wish that I could remember. It was such a long time
ago now. Richard might be able to help!

Q. A number of the sprites are strikingly similar to recognisable pop-culture figures such as Hugo the Abominable Snowman from the Bugs Bunny cartoons and Eddie Munster. Were you at all concerned that the IP police might bang your door down demanding compensation?

A. I don't think we really thought that much in those days around legal issues in the same way we do nowadays in the industry. I think the whole industry was still so nascent at that point that we hadn't matured enough to even entertain those sorts of concerns!

Q. Did you ever get to the bottom of Richard Lemarchand's preoccupation with dairy? Was he lactose intolerant by any chance?

A. Richard had (and still has I'm sure) a real fixation with dairy-related puns and I suspect, if one was to look hard

enough, you'd see echoes of this through Legacy of Kain and Uncharted!
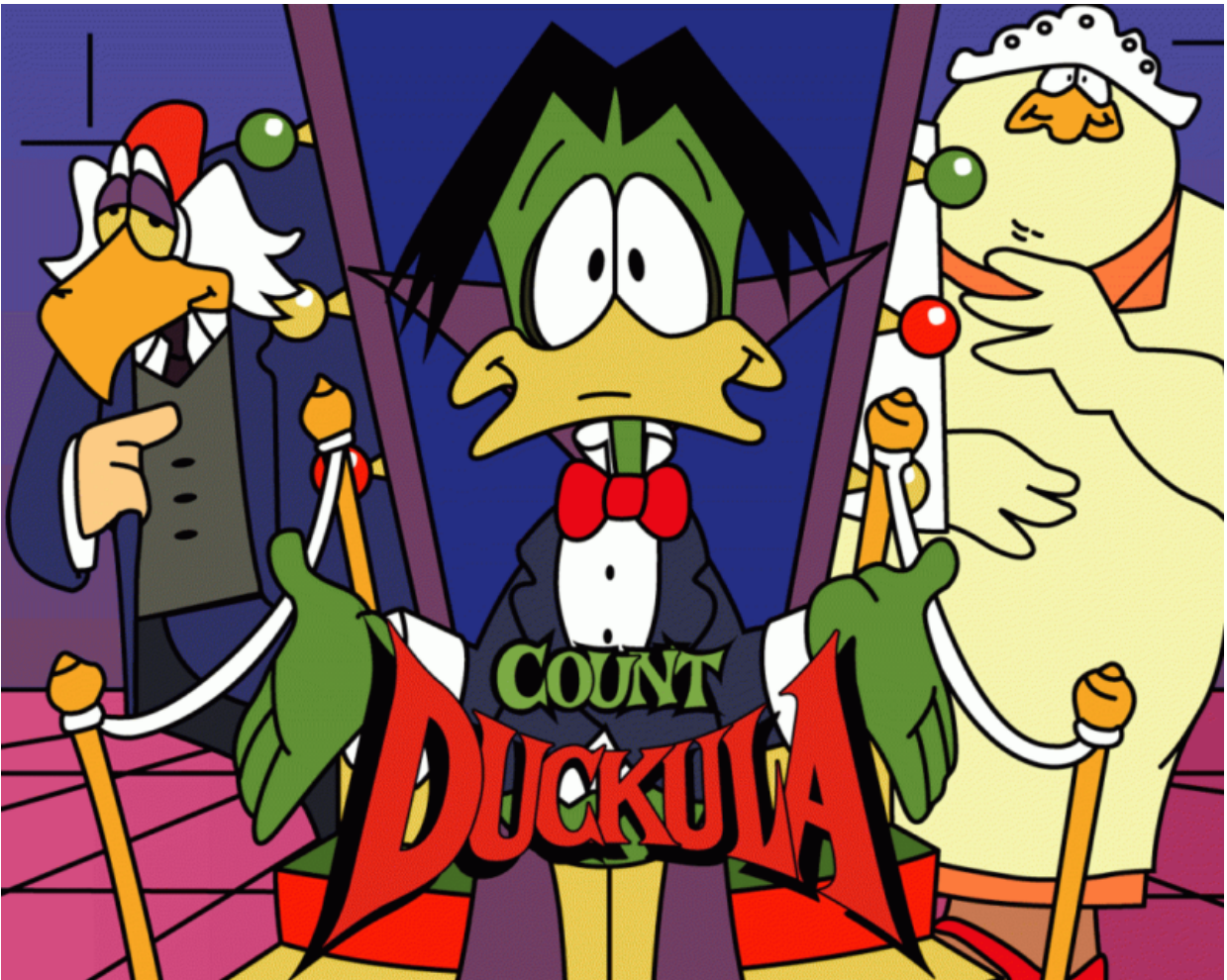
Q. There are a variety of spooky parallels between Boo! and Count Duckula, another children's animation Keith was responsible for directing. Was that part of the design brief, or just something that osmosed into the product naturally?

A. I don't think that was part of the design brief. I think the core of the game was the idea of a ghost kid who didn't kill its enemies but instead scared them away by shouting "Boo!". The idea of Boo, the ghost being able to find power-ups that allowed it to gain extra abilities inspired by classic movie trope monsters was the core I think. That and milk.

Q. Keith doesn't appear to have been employed in the animation industry since 1996. Another Keith Scoble now works as a site manager for a construction company. Is he the same one? I'd like to know where to send my Danger Mouse pencil case for him to sign.

A. I've no idea, unfortunately. I lost contact with him after I left Microprose.

Q. Did you consider drafting in any established actors to voice Boo!'s cast as might be expected from a game with stylistic similarities to children's cartoons which set the bar in this area?

A. Most games of this time were on 8Mbit cartridges (which was only 1 megabyte!). Boo! was unusual (and expensive to manufacture) as it required a 16Mbit cartridge due to all the pretty graphics. We didn't have any space for VO from memory!

Q. I noticed that your design proposal document contains quality standard projections for each element of the game, and they were all at the upper end of the spectrum. Do developers ever set out to make a game with inferior graphics or sound, for instance in order to meet budget restraints? I always thought this occurred as an unfortunate consequence of the industry's fast pace and strict deadlines, or in a worst-case scenario, a dearth of talented staff.

A. I think every creative medium has budget constraints. I think it's the talented teams that manage to work round these constraints and create great experiences are the winners.

Q. Commodore folded a year prior to Boo!'s expected release date and Amiga users were leaving the platform in their droves. Were you concerned that the game would flop because the target audience was rapidly dwindling?

A. TBH the main development platform for Boo! was the Super Nintendo... but there were similar concerns that we were releasing quite close to the end of its life cycle. Ultimately we never did finish Boo! It was cancelled.

Q. How prohibitive were the licensing fees imposed by SEGA and Nintendo? Were they a decisive factor in cancelling the game?

A. I think it was a difficult time in the industry due to the high cost of manufacture for physical cartridge combined with the long lead times between placing an order and getting the stock on shelves. There was a lot of risk for publishers due to this and this I'm sure was a factor in the cancellation.

Q. How did you and the team take the news that Boo! wouldn't make it to the retailer's shelves?

A. It was a really sad day. The team had put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into the game.

Q. I believe Boo! was 80% complete when development ceased. Was a playable beta version of your work in progress ever compiled?

A. Yes. There were playable builds. In fact for a few years after I left Microprose I actually had a development cartridge with the build on it... which I unfortunately lost.

Q. The Amiga version of Putty Squad was for a long time assumed lost into the mists of time. Nevertheless, in 2013 it was finally resurrected and released for the bygone platform. Do you think there's a slim chance Boo! could enjoy a similar

belated release, or at least by way of one of the more contemporary platforms such as Android, iOS or Steam?

A. I guess nothing is impossible. I suspect that licensing issues and the like would make it highly unlikely though. Also Android/iOS wouldn't be great for Boo! It was designed around a controller.

Q. MicroProse's IP has changed hands numerous times since the '90s. Who would any interested parties have to contact in order to carry the baton to the finish line?

A. I have no idea!

Q. What was your thought process as you backed up some of the artwork, animations and VHS footage of Boo!? Was it just that you had always been a conscientious preserver of data, or did you think it would feature somewhere in your future?

A. I think it wasn't conscious, I just found a couple of floppy disks years after the fact and thought that it might be of interest to people.

Q. Did you work on any other titles that had to be abandoned to the cutting room floor for similar reasons?

A. Yeah. Unfortunately so. Tinhead SNES never released (and the Megadrive/Genesis version came out much later by another publisher). Impossible Mission 2025 similarly never released on console (though it did release on Amiga).
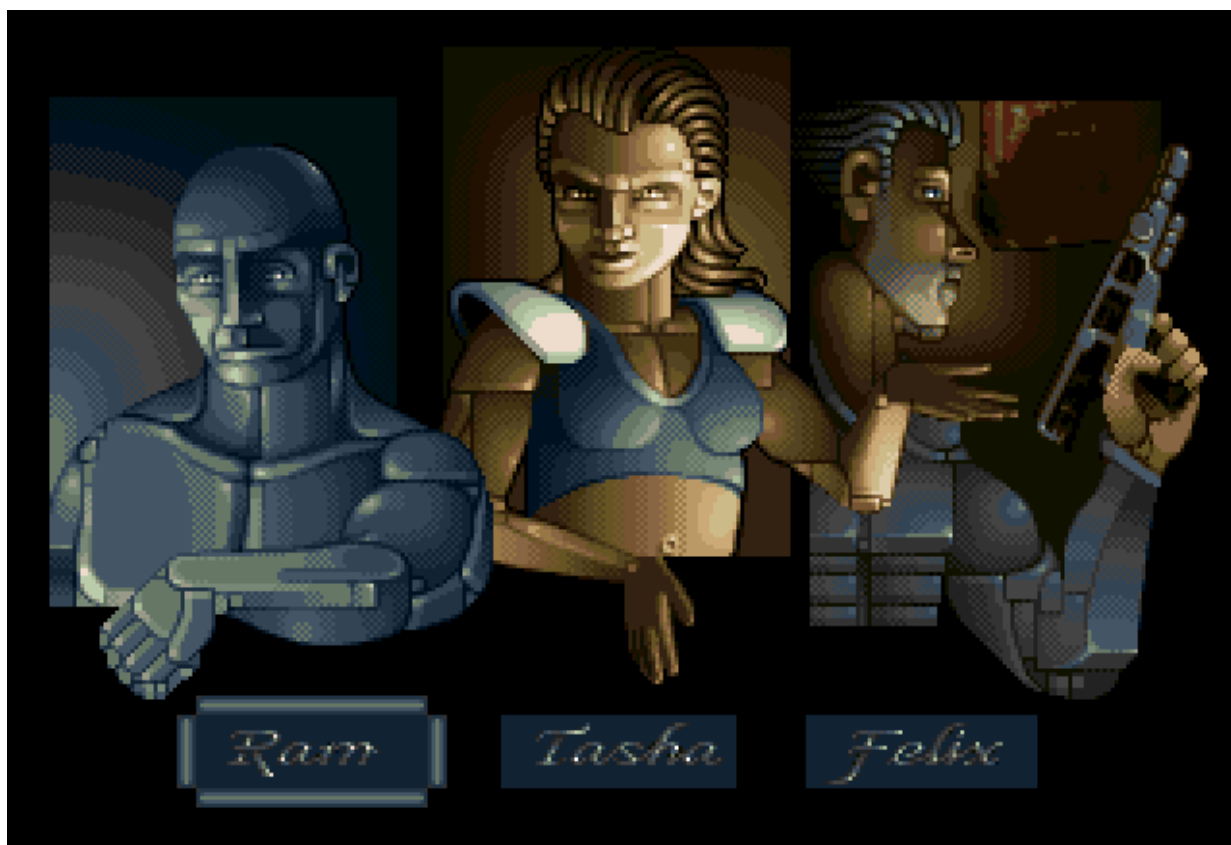
Q. Where did your career take you after you left MicroProse? What are you doing these days?

A. I joined an internet gaming company straight after Microprose at a time when people were still mostly using AOL and 28.8 modems! After that I moved down to Guildford and worked at Bullfrog and latterly Lionhead Studios...

Q. Do you get involved in retro gaming in any form?

A. Not really, though funnily enough I did download MAME the other day just to play Phoenix again!

Never before has so much been written about a game that doesn't exist! I love it!

I'd like to sincerely thank everyone who generously gave up their time to contribute to this article. It's much appreciated!